



THE JOURNEY OF HINDI LANGUAGE JOURNALISM IN INDIA: FROM RAJ TO SWARAJ AND BEYOND - BOOK REVIEW

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BOOK

The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India: From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond

Authored by: Mrinal Pande

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BOOK REVIEW

I began reading this book by reflecting on the title and wondering about the necessity of including the word “language” in it. Would not “Hindi journalism” alone have sufficed? Intrigued, I quickly turned the pages to discover how the author connects the Hindi language with journalism in India. Another, perhaps more personal reason for reading the book was to bridge a gap I have felt as a media academician—my own disconnect with Hindi journalism space despite growing up in the Hindi heartland of Bihar. Having received an English education, this disconnection had only deepened over time.

The book spans three broad timelines, starting with the colonial era. One chapter discusses the evolution of Hindi during British rule, emphasizing that the history of Indian print media cannot be reduced to ownership, editorial teams, or sales, as many authors have done.

It is fascinating how a book on Hindi-language journalism begins by highlighting the importance of multilingualism and the contributions of polyglots to Indian journalism, as discussed by A.K. Ramanujan (1993). The author cites how princely clans who supported private printing in the Hindi belt were not only well-versed in classical languages like Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, but also deeply rooted in northern dialects such as Khadi Boli, Braj, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Punjabi, and Rajasthani. With over 1,652 languages in India (RGCI, 1961), 29 of which are spoken by over a million people (RGCI, 2001), Hindi holds the largest reach across 11 northern states.

The book also delves into the challenges faced by the vernacular press in its early years, when Hindi in the Devanagari script was emerging as a formal language. One compelling section discusses how the language hierarchy, shaped by British colonial policies, influenced the development of Hindi. Fort William College, where Hindi was formally institutionalized under John Gilchrist (1759-1841), exemplifies this. The author notes, “The two languages, once considered inseparable, became increasingly distanced as markers of two distinct races in the north: Hindus and Muslims—a division exploited by political forces.” This growth of Hindi-language publications

simultaneously fueled regional tensions while expanding the public sphere.

The book explores how languages navigated secular and nationalist ideologies in the first four decades of the twentieth century, calling this period a “qualitative leap” in bold experimentation, new genres, and politically conscious writers. One’s caste and social status also influenced the use of Sanskritized or hybridized versions of Hindi, perpetuating editorial hierarchies in early twentieth-century journalism. The book even touches on caste-specific Hindi newspapers in its opening chapter.

Notably, the book discusses censorship efforts to suppress nationalist publications like *Navjivan* (published by Gandhi) and other Hindi papers. The collaboration between Gandhi and Nehru to launch a trust that produced *Navjivan* in Hindi, *National Herald* in English, and *Qaumi Awaaz* in Urdu underscores the importance of vernacular languages in public and political discourse during the colonial period. This is well encapsulated by the Urdu poet Akbar Allahabadi’s line, “Jab tope muqabil ho, akhbar nikalo” (When faced with a cannon, launch a newspaper).

The post-Independence period, or the “Swaraj” era, is described as a time when the public sphere expanded in India—albeit unevenly compared to Europe. The politicization of Hindi as a marker of Hindu identity by the right-wing, the growing tensions between Hindi and other vernacular languages, and the continued dominance of English as a link language are some key developments the author examines. I felt the book could have explored how Hindi-language journalism played a role in shaping or questioning Nehruvian ideals during the early post-independence decades, which were marked by development journalism. However, the focus remains on broader linguistic and political shifts rather than specific content.

The most attention-grabbing sections of the book cover the disruptive decades of liberalization, globalization, and privatization, leading up to the post-COVID era. Few works have examined how these forces reshaped the Hindi press, and in this regard, the book succeeds in tracing the digital transformations, new market dynamics, ownership structures, and the rise of media monopolies. It also touches on the blurring of managerial and editorial roles, the growth of political advertising, and the transformation of circulation strategies, including rags-to-riches stories like that of Vijay Singh, the “Hawker Se Haakim” (2018) figure who employed innovative

marketing to boost Hindi newspaper sales.

The book dedicates substantial space to how the Hindi newspaper industry changed post-1990s, especially with readership surveys and the influence of market forces. It explores how Hindi has come to outshine English in circulation battles, even supporting English newspapers as a “piggy bank.” Other important issues discussed include the rise of “magazines,” the erosion of editorial values, the surge of political advertising, the emergence of paid news, and the exploitation of stringers and reporters. The 2014 elections, in particular, are highlighted as a turning point, with political advertising and embedded journalism becoming the norm, and censorship retaliating against critical coverage.

The chapter on gender and women in Hindi media left me wanting more, as it briefly touches on the underrepresentation of women in senior editorial roles, as authors of “serious” stories, and as experts on TV panels. Similarly, the absence of Dalit and OBC writers in Hindi journalism is flagged as a concern.

The final chapters, “What Moved My Newspaper,” “The New Media Ecology,” and “Post-COVID Media,” will likely interest readers, particularly students familiar with Mrinal Pande’s journalistic and literary work. Her simple yet anecdotal writing style, combined with personal experiences of navigating the male-dominated corridors of Hindi newsrooms, adds layers of gender intersectionality and offers a fresh perspective. This book is a valuable addition to the documentation of Hindi-language press in India, especially for English readers who may otherwise avoid engaging with the subject due to the lack of accessible material in English.